Review/**Television**

Father Coughlin, 'The Radio Priest'

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

Long before the televangelists, there was an enormously popular radio personality named the Rev. Charles Coughlin. He is profiled on Channel 13 at 10 o'clock tonight on "An American Experience" in a presentation called "The Radio Priest." The producer is Irv Drasnin, whose distinguished documentary career covers extended periods at CBS News and PBS's "Frontline."

Born, raised and educated in Canada, Father Coughlin became a leading spokesman of the "America for Americans" movement of the 1930's. Along with such "lunatic fringe" figures as Gerald L. K. Smith and Francis E. Townsend, he formed the National Union for Social Justice, its primary purpose being the dumping of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. These were the years of the Great Depression. Institutions were being threatened. People were looking for demons and evildoers. Demagogues were popping up all over the landscape to provide them. Father Coughlin, giving his followers a little bit of everything, made impassioned speeches against both Communism and capitalism, the latter scorned for its concentration of wealth and profit-taking.

His parish church, the Shrine of the Little Flower, opened in 1923 in the Detroit suburb of Royal Oak and gradually became something of a national shrine as the Roman Catholic priest turned his weekly radio program into one of the most popular shows on the air. While the country coped with a crisis without precedent, Father Coughlin inveighed against "cruel exploitation of the workers." His parish was deluged with mail, most of the letters containing a requested "contribution" of a single dollar.

Fortunately, the power of the lunatic fringe remained considerably smaller than its grandstanding. When Roosevelt was re-elected overwhelmingly in 1936, Father Coughlin became more strident. His demons now becme the "money changers" and the "international conspiracy of Jewish bankers." His sympathies with Fascist organizations, including the German-American Bund that supported Hitler, were increasingly more apparent. His movement began losing followers. In 1942, the radio priest, his voice noticeably less caressing and persuasive now that the United States was at war with Germany and Japan, was finally silenced by his superiors in the church. He lived until the 1960's. His story, barely skimmed but compellingly told by Mr. Drasnin, remains an object lesson in demogoguery, as relevant as ever.

Television Reviews

'Radio Priest' Shows Televangelists Have No New Tricks

As many people who were around 50 years ago can tell you, manipulation of the media by religious demagogues is not exclusive to the television era. It's simply been born again—so to speak—from the radio age, as tonight's easy history lesson "The Radio Priest" (9 p.m., Channels 28 and 15) shows with divine clarity.

This latest chapter of the PBS series "The American Experience" focuses on Father Charles Coughlin, who differed from today's Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertsons in three notable ways:

—He used radio rather than TV.

—He was a Roman Catholic priest (from a Detroit suburb) rather than a protestant fundamentalist.

—As a speaker he stomped around in a vague and contradictory middle ground (berating "Bolsheviks" in one breath while slamming "Wall Street capitalists" in the next) before eventually revealing more overt fascist tendencies.

Otherwise, he fit the modern mold pretty well—attracting an audience by tapping into its misfortunes and fears, getting deeply involved in politics, and taking in millions of dollars. His audience was estimated at 30 million during the late 1930s.

"Radio Priest" leaves comparisons with Coughlin's modern counterparts to the mind of the viewer. Instead, it puts us in the man's time, adeptly using newsreels, promotional films and interviews to give a sense of the Depression and how Coughlin and others took advantage of many Americans' distress.

The documentary does leave at least one important question little touched upon: Why did the Catholic hierarchy allow Coughlin to attain such individual power?

While pointing out that Coughlin's archbishop approved of his actions, "Radio Priest," made by veteran documentarist Irv Drasnin, leaves us to speculate about the position of other church officials, including the Pope, before they finally decided to lower the boom on Coughlin in 1942.

Not that Coughlin's brand of religion-through-hate has died; it's simply evolved into a larger monster with an even longer list of victims.

—TERRY ATKINSON

'Nova' Shirks Its Duty in Harvard Medical Report

Grappling with an issue that has confounded medical experts for decades, "Nova" tonight focuses on the dilemma of changing the way physicians are trained in an episode titled "Can We Make a Better Doctor?" It airs at 8 p.m. on Channels 28 and 15, and at 9 p.m. on Channel 50.

The question is one of the most worthwhile in the growing realization that the United States lacks a rational national health policy. Unfortunately, the show, produced by station WGBH in Boston, is more of a video press release for Harvard Medical School than probing journalism.

"Nova" reports on a Harvard experiment called the "New Pathway," in which the structure of the four-year medical school curriculum has been changed. In place of the first two years being devoted to instruction in basic science, Harvard rushes students into clinical experiences—examining and diagnosing real patients—almost as soon as they arrive.

Whether this will work is a question that preoccupies a great deal of the American medical education system today. But in its reportorial approach, "Nova" portrays something that seems like medical students playing doctor.

Dr. Daniel Tosteson, the school's dean and principle force behind the new curriculum, is never interviewed in the hourlong program. Only advocates of the curriculum either at or strongly tied to Harvard appear. Nowhere is there an authoritative voice with no direct stake in the outcome. The closest is in several snippets from Dr. Arnold Relman, editor of the New England Journal of Medicine, who is clearly sympathetic.

More significantly, the producers never clearly describe or effectively illustrate how the curriculum can possibly have its intended effect. The show focuses on the experiences of six first-year students, but the reactions of these young people themselves imply serious obstacles to the educational method which "Nova" clearly favors.

By the end of the hour, one student confides that he is drifting to a preference to be a surgeon—duplicating a process that has distorted American medicine by producing wastefully huge pools of surgeons at the expense of primary care doctors. And some students who had voiced commitments to practicing primary care medicine in the inner city agree that their student loans may necessitate something more lucrative.

So in the end, whatever it is that is different in the way these students are being trained remains elusive in terms of its possible effect.

"Nova" promises more programs, following these six students through all four years of medical school and into residency. But if the show's overwhelming acceptance of Harvard line is any indication of what is to come, this curriculum examination will never tell us what we most need to know.

—ALLAN PARACHINI

'Radio Priest' is recalled in provocative PBS docu

Because the 1930s have come to be symbolized by the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl and Franklin D. Roosevelt, some of the subtle undercurrents of that chaotic period tend to be forgotten.

One such aspect is the subject of PBS' outstanding "American Experience" series tonight at 10:05 on Channel 9 — "The Radio Priest." It's a profile of the Rev. Charles Coughlin, the Michigan priest who, at the height of his popularity in the 1930s, was a familiar name, face and voice to millions — and a man whose message made both Wall Street and Washington, D.C., nervous.

This hour reminds us electronic evangelism is nothing new. But while most of today's televangelists focus on religion and fund-raising, Coughlin spoke directly to the financial and political fears of the underclass of a nation in the throes of the Great Depression. His weekly sermons (and his subsequent weekly magazine) sent mixed messages, however,

JOHN VOORHEES
Times television columnist

for while he was in favor of some of the tenets of President Roosevelt's New Deal, he also preached anti-Semitic hate, claiming the Depression was the fault of Jewish bankers.

His "America for Americans" sermons and his followers' enthusiasm reminds us fear of communism was as prevalent in the 1930s as in the 1920s and 1950s.

This documentary was written, directed, produced and narrated by Irv Drasnin, CBS News alumnus and producer of five films for PBS' "Frontline." Not only does Drasnin turn in a provocative portrait of Coughlin, but he's skillfully interwoven a profile of the rise and importance of radio in the 1930s, using newsreels to good effect. It adds up to a fascinating hour that anyone with the slightest interest in American history should find a real eye-opener.

JOURNAL & COURIER

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TUESDAY
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9 p.m. Tuesday slot stuffed with goodies

By MIKE HUGHES 4760
Gannett News Service

What is it with TV's sudden obsession for 9 p.m. on Tuesdays? Why are networks stuffing their best shows there?

There are other times that almost get ignored. At 8 p.m. Saturdays, grown adults sometimes feel obligated to watch *227*.

But tonight's slot is stuffed to the limit. That includes:

■ CBS usually saves its best movies for Sundays, but not this week. It's repeating *Promise*, one of the most-honored films in TV history.

■ ABC finally has *Moonlighting* back and has us talking. I liked last week's season-opener, some people didn't, but the question is moot. That was the final episode from series creator Glenn Caron; now the detectives will remember to take some cases. If you're only watching to see Cybill Shepherd, you can switch to *Daisy Miller* on cable's Arts & Entertainment channel.

■ What happens when a loud, lurid story gets some skilled, subtle acting? The result is schizophrenic, as you'll see on this round of NBC's *In The Heat of the Night*.

The story seems to have been written with scarlet ink or a neon tube. It needs coincidences, plot stretches and five shootings. I'd estimate that little Sparta, Miss., has three killings per capita.

But screeching stories usually get the same kind of acting. Instead, this one gets terrific work.

The stars — Emmy-winner Carroll O'Conner, Oscar-nominee Howard Rollins — do their usual fine jobs. Michael Warren is solid as the guest star.

But the real stunner here is Anne-Marie Johnson as Rollins' wife, locked into a secret. It is a performance that's controlled and compelling.

Now we know *Heat* has three superb regulars. Next, it can find a script.

■ And going against those, *American Experience* has emerged as one of PBS' best shows. This time, it has a vivid portrait of Father Charles Coughlin.

It was in 1926 that a Canadian priest set up his parish in Royal Oak, Mich. The Detroit suburb had no post office and only 25 Catholic families, but his ambition was unlimited. He built a 600-seat church and unleashed his powers.

"He had the most dynamic voice I've ever heard," Jacqueline Mills, a former parishioner, recalls in the film. "I think he could wake the dead."

Mary Schultes agrees. "You forgot you were poor, you forgot you were unemployed."

Soon, people had much to forget. In 1933, Coughlin began his radio broadcasts, railing against Communists on the left and bankers on the right.

His audience was estimated at 30-45 million, his finances estimated at $20,000 a week. Unlimited power brought uncontrolled words.

The "international bankers" became "international Jewish bankers." As hatred of Hitlerism grew in America, the power of Coughlin's words decreased. In 1942, his church superiors ordered him off the air.

Father Charles Coughlin faded. The power of populist preachers would be back.

PRIME

You can blame the writers' strike for *I'll Be Home for Christmas*, which replays the hoary drama of a soldier separated from his family, or *Glory Days*, in which a middle-aged dad quits his job at a tire factory to "return to his adolescent dream" of playing quarterback. But what does it mean when the most original specials are either spin-offs or reruns?

PROMISE (Tuesday, 9 p.m., Channel 2) had its much-heralded premiere two years ago. But this story of the bond between two brothers—one feckless, the other schizophrenic—is still distinguished by its harrowing honesty. James Woods got all the attention for his bravura performance as "crazy" D.J., but it's James Garner who carries the greater burden, by conveying the anguish of an *homme moyen sensuel*. Both actors are buoyed by a script that refuses to pretty up a grim situation. Though the plot occasionally resorts to comforting didacticism (this *is* television), the power of this story is its insistence on representing insanity as an unrelenting presence, something that won't pause for a commercial or vanish when the credits crawl.

A similar aura of integrity hovers over **ROOTS: THE GIFT (Sunday, 9 p.m., Channel 7)**. This latest sequel to the mother of all miniseries is hokey enough to watch around a holiday table, and its stentorian performance style recalls certain TV productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. What keeps you watching is gritty ambience and an insistent tangibility. Even the white masters seem merely evil rather than monstrous, and the image of slavery is shorn of all pageantry. It seems so plausible that we can't help but insert ourselves into the tableau. The sense of implication is what makes this sentimental journey powerful.

***The Radio Priest* (Tuesday, 9 p.m., Channel 13)**

Meanwhile on the documentary front, **THE RADIO PRIEST (Tuesday, 9 p.m., Channel 13)** introduces us to a media monster and plants him squarely in his time—as well as ours. Father Coughlin seems much more terrifying when seen as well as heard; the very framing of his face (in the cross hairs of a crucifix or the nimbus of a flag) recalls fascist iconography. In order to blunt their anticlerical edge, the producers include astonishing footage of American Nazis on parade. But what makes this film so powerful is its connection to the present. Interviews with former followers of Coughlin make it clear that anti-Semitism still flourishes in the guise of God and country. And though the current crop of televangelists are never heard from, their spirit infuses this archive, so that it can't be relegated to the frenzied past.

MARIA CALLAS: AN OPERATIC BIOGRAPHY (Sunday, 9:05 p.m., Channel 13) is a blast from the more sanctioned past. This sensitive portrait manages to be sympathetic without fawning—and more than that, it makes you understand what the fawning was all about. Performance is foremost here, and her evocative genius is evident even on the tinniest TV speakers. The biography itself is full of surprises for those who remember Callas only as a tempest in a tiara. But you'll wish this film had an intellectual, as well as emotional, grasp of its subject. There's something central to the '50s about this ritual of the sacrificial diva; it's an image that informs not just opera, but pop songs and even cinema of that period. Is it reaching to imagine Callas in light of Garland or even Monroe? Is it asking too much that "glamor" be imbedded in a historical context?

In the medium of Joan Collins and Vanna White, it's context enough to reveal that even this Callas biography is a repeat.

—Richard Goldstein

Research: Jesse Drucker

PIX

Joseph H. Lewis's **GUN CRAZY** (1949), from a screenplay by Mackinlay Kantor and Willard Kaufman, with John Dall, Peggy Cummins, Morris Carnovsky, Barry Kroger, Anabel Shaw, Harry Lewis, has risen from its B-picture origins to take an honored place in the tradition of doomed outcast couples on the run starting with Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* in 1937, and continuing with Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night*, Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, Terrence Malick's *Badlands*, and Robert Altman's *Thieves Like Us*. The switch here is that the female of the species (Cummins) is deadlier and gun-crazier than her mate (Dall). Lewis, with several other *noir* classics to his credit, was one of the more interesting cult discoveries of the revisionist '60s. Kroger deserves special mention as the villain with the most insinuatingly fat lips in the business. **Thursday, 8 p.m., Channel 27, Paragon Uptown Channel N**

Mark Rydel's **THE ROSE** (1979), from a screenplay by Bill Kerby and Bo Goldman, based on a story by Bill Kerby, with Bette Midler, Alan Bates, Frederic Forrest, Harry Dean Stanton, Barry Primus, and David Keith, caught Midler in her presuperstar period somewhat miscast as a drunkenly declining Janis Joplin type in the last days of her misspent life and career. She is hurried along to her dismal fate by her ruthless manager (Bates). A cautionary tale of the drug-debauched rock scene, *The Rose* was more gritty than glossy. The earnest tone of this overlong (134 minutes) saga made it too downbeat for the oncoming feel-good market of the Reagan Regency. Forrest, as the one decent encounter in the singer's degraded existence, was unfortunately not the light at the end of her tunnel. Still, the noncampy Midler is fascinating to watch and hear. **Saturday, 3 p.m., Channel 11**

***Roots: The Gift* (Sunday, 9 p.m., Channel 7)**

Peter Bogdanovich's **DAISY MILLER** (1974), from the screenplay by Frederic Raphael, based on the story by Henry James, with Cybill Shepherd, Barry Brown, Cloris Leachman, Mildred Natwick, Eileen Brennan, and James MacMurtry, started off the Beverly Hills sport of Bogdanovich-bashing with a bit of Cybill-slashing thrown in. In the process, the extent to which Bogdanovich had managed to penetrate the sleepless Jamesian unconscious was generally underestimated. Shepherd was not entirely wrong as a thoroughly irritating Daisy Miller, and for once the essential coldness of the Bogdanovich-Shepherd collaboration was appropriate for the subject. Raphael's screenplay was a masterly job of dramatic condensation. **Tuesday, 9 p.m., Channel 28**

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TUESDAY

Previews

Topping the lists tonight: a repeat showing for the most honored dramatic special in television history.

☐ **The American Experience:** During the Depression, the radio was "America's most important piece of furniture." One of the era's most widely heard radio voices belonged to Father Charles Coughlin, whose weekly sermons reached an estimated 45 million people. During his discourses, Coughlin would lash out at the evils of modern capitalism and call on Americans to take a stand for God and country. He also denounced Franklin Roosevelt and blamed the Depression on a conspiracy of "International Jewish Communist bankers." Irv Drasnin's "The Radio Priest" is a marvelous profile of the man and the era. The parallels between Coughlin and modern televangelists are striking. (9 PM 21, 49; 10 PM 13)

THIS WEEK'S DOCUMENTARIES

"The Radio Priest"– by Harriet Van Horne.

IN A NATION where half the population was born after 1940, the Great Depression of the '30s is simply legend, a murky time when stockbrokers jumped out windows, sweet old ladies sold apples on street corners and Bing Crosby hit the top of the charts with "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?".

In fact, the Depression was a national crisis without precedent, a disaster that almost led to revolution. In a land of 123 million people, 34 million belonged to families that had no breadwinner. And it is inaccurate to say, as some do, that "nobody starved". Hospitals took in malnutrition cases every day. Doctors reported seeing hungry two-year-olds who had chewed their hands raw. In Harlan County, Kentucky, miners' families ate weeds, dandelions and berries.

Teachers in the bankrupt city of Chicago fed 11,000 children out of their own pockets, though they had not been paid in months. Every big city had a cluster of tar-paper shacks, the grimly named "Hoovervilles", where the dispossessed lived hand-to-mouth.

"The Depression hurt people and maimed them permanently because it literally depressed mind and spirit," wrote Caroline Bird in her splendid story of the '30s, *The Invisible Scar*.

Now, all the foregoing is essential to an appreciation of this week's "American Experience" entry. The subject is "The Radio Priest: Father Charles Couglin" (Tuesday at 10 pm on Channel 13). Couglin was one of several Depression demagogues who exploited the resentments and fears of a desperate people. He told them why they were poor, why the system had failed them. It was all the fault of "international bankers and Jews". And Communists, of course, who were largely Jewish, he said, taking their orders from Moscow.

When Father Couglin held a rally in Madison Square Garden, 18,000 of the faithful rose up with a roar when he asked them to help him "restore America to the Americans".

A virtue of this disturbing film – written, produced and narrated by Irv Drasnin – is its determination to keep Father Couglin within the context of his times. We hear the comments, not of today's young sociologists and economists, but of old-timers who lived through the Depression, men who remember how the Radio Priest seduced millions to his cause.

"People were ripe for somebody with answers," says white-haired novelist, Wallace Stegner. "Couglin had answers. . . His voice had a reassuring quality."

At the peak of his popularity, Father Couglin – pastor of a small church in Royal Oak, Michigan – had a following of 30 million Americans. He received 400,000 letters a week, more than President Roosevelt. Like many of the Depression's angry folk, Couglin was a Roosevelt hater, scorning him as "the anti-God".

What was Couglin like? The faded black-and-white newsreels assembled for this documentary show a trim, agile, medium-sized man given to extravagant gestures. His articulation was overprecise, his manner occasionally oily. "Next week," he would say in a conspiratorial tone, "I will disclose information not generally available to the public. . ."

Much of the time his information was wrong. He endorsed the infamous Protocols of Zion. He said the Politburo was totally Jewish when the reverse was true. He praised Hitler and, astonishingly, castigated American Jews for denouncing him.

As the U.S. drifted toward World War II, Father Couglin's following diminished. Two cardinals of the church (in Boston and Chicago) repudiated him. Finally, the Vatican sent an emissary to Royal Oak to tell the Radio Priest that it was sign-off time. Further persuasion arrived from the U.S. Post Office, which revoked his second-class mailing permit.

The hour is not without its ironies. While denouncing Wall Street bankers as international crooks, says Drasnin, Father Couglin maintained a busy account with Paine Webber. In all, supporters sent him $4 million. Where it all went is still a mystery.

Besides telling the saga of Father Couglin and his Union for Social Justice, the film offers glimpses of other demagogues of the time, such as Gerald L.K. Smith and Fritz Kuhn, leader of the German-American Bund. Also on view are the evangelists of the day (Aimee Semple McPherson, a glamorous spellbinder), and the men with promises, such as Huey Long, who pledged every American "a home with a radio and a washing machine".

A brief, beguiling segment offers a capsule of 1930s radio – Rudy Vallee, The Green Hornet, Will Rogers, The Shadow. What an innocent time it was, and yet, how deeply troubled. If you take the long view of history, you can see the beginning of the social currents, the dangerous delusions that were to give rise, years later, to the John Birch Society, to the hate groups, the greedy televangelists with their gift for exploiting fear and resentment. They flourished because we are a nation that seems to have learned nothing from the past.

"What's past is prologue," wrote Shakespeare. If you doubt it, tune in and meet "The Radio Priest".

In addition to being a renowned TV critic, Harriet Van Horne has written a column on political and social issues for the New York Times syndicate. She is the author of a collection of essays, Never Go Anywhere Without a Pencil.

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